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Benefits of prison farms go beyond saving tax dollars

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By Renee Standera - [email](#)

COLUMBIA, SC (WIS) - Just eight miles from downtown Columbia, there's a farm that gives you the impression you're in the deep country. You can stand in the middle of a pasture and gaze upon the Columbia skyline.

But not everyone who works this farm can leave. It's property owned by the South Carolina Department of Corrections. And the food grown here feeds inmates throughout the state.

"It's money that we don't have to ask for in our budget so it's a savings for the state," Corrections Director Bryan Sterling said.

"We have inmate labor readily available," he said. "We use that inmate labor. It's beneficial to the department in many ways. It not only saves money for the state in growing the products, but it also allows these folks, these inmates, to learn a skill so when they leave here, they have a skill where they could actually be employed at veterinary clinics or farms across the state."

SCDC has three major farming operations. At Walden Correctional Institution outside Columbia, inmates grow vegetables and maintain a small herd of beef cattle; Wateree River Correctional Institution in Rembert grows corn, wheat, soybeans, and hosts a dairy farm; and MacDougall Correctional Institution in Ridgeville is the site of an egg production operation.

"The inmates that actually grow the food take pride in growing the food," Sterling said. "It gives them a sense of accomplishment, which, a lot of folks coming into SCDC have never had."

SCDC's farming operations have more than doubled in the past 20 years. Although the agriculture products go back into the system to feed the inmates, the goal is to have the farms 100 percent self-sufficient.

"We save a little more money every year and we hope to get bigger," Corrections Support Services Agriculture Branch Chief Bert Dew said.

"We are very tight with the state's – with the taxpayers' money. It would be my goal if we could grow everything we could eat, but we don't have enough land."

Eggs and milk not consumed by inmates are sold. The money goes back into the SCDC agriculture budget to finance operations.

In addition to providing inmates with training for jobs in a consistent industry, SCDC's farming programs provide them with healthy food.

"They eat better inside than they probably ever did outside," Dew said. "We don't have any hormones in the chickens. We don't have any hormones in the milk."

Preparing Inmates for Jobs

It may not take much skill to pick vegetables, but working with animals and farm equipment takes some

knowledge.

The dairy at Wateree River Correctional Institution trains inmates for jobs in a field that has high demand for reliable employees.

"It gives the – teaches these inmates a good work ethic," Dew said. "We show them where eggs, milk, grits, vegetables come from. A lot of these people have never been on a farm. Being around animals makes them better."

"The jobs the inmates have taking care of the animals develops into an ownership," Joel Anderson, division director of support services, said. "They'll form a bond with the calves. The importance of the job is to keep them busy. They learn a skill and it benefits us as a department."

"These guys work hard, not just the employees," he said. "I'm talking about the inmates, too."

"I'd like every inmate that works for us to have that type of pride and if they work for us long enough, they will."

"The dairy training school has given us a great opportunity to teach these guys about responsibility and a good work ethic within the dairy industry," Assistant Dairy Manager Nicholas Julian said. "The dairy industry struggles with keeping a strong labor force and we see this as an opportunity to be able to fulfill that gap and provide a strong comprehensive person to be able to move forward in that dairy industry."

SCDC officials brag that as many as six former inmates have found jobs working on dairy farms in South Carolina.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says farm workers earned an average hourly wage of \$13.62 in May 2013. Census numbers from 2012 say employees on about 2,000 South Carolina farms were paid a total of nearly \$38 million in wages.

"These folks that are finding jobs, the chance of them coming back for another crime is very limited, so it's a win-win for the state," Sterling said.

"People are really pleased," Dew said. "In fact, we get calls every day, 'Got any more? We need help,' so I think we're succeeding in our mission. Every one that we don't get back is one the state doesn't have to take care of again."

The inmate labor serves a secondary purpose for the department.

"They have to be discipline-free if they work here," Sterling said. "So if there's a discipline problem they would lose their jobs and they know that."

For some who have decades, even life to serve, even farm labor is more appealing than sitting inside cinder-block walls all day.

"As any farmer will tell you, manual labor is very exhausting," he said. "At the end of the end of the day, I think they're pretty tired and just want to eat and go to sleep."

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